

Leadership: Who Is Responsible for the Exclusion of Women from Project Leadership?

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Abstract: Some researchers confirm the existence of gender based differences, whilst others discount the presence of the differences. The reality remains that women are underrepresented in senior management positions in general, and particularly in project leadership though they comprise an average of 55% of the population. Women vote men into political leadership and show a preference for male managers and leaders. Hellen Zille decided on an all men provincial cabinet, Margaret Thatcher had a total of three women in her cabinet throughout her reign, Indira Ghandi filled her cabinet with males to the exclusion of women, and so on. Ironically, men appoint more women into leadership compared to what women leaders appoint. This article concludes that the exclusion of women in leadership has more to do with women themselves, than it has to do with gender stereotyping as erroneously portrayed. This is evidenced by the preference of men by women leaders.

Key words: gender based leadership; barriers to senior leadership; leadership styles; skills and competencies

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1. Introduction

Buckle and Thomas (2003, pp. 433-441) suggest the presence of characteristics that distinguish men from women in their leadership styles. Men's leadership styles are recorded as field independent; separated from the environment, performance oriented, active, linear-sequential, hierarchically authoritative, with a quest for control and with impersonal task focus. Female leaders are known or portrayed as; field dependent, context sensitive, connected to the environment, improvisational, receptive, non-linear, with lateral-democratic authority, interpersonal with emotional attachments. Female leaders are therefore thought to display high levels of empathy, mutuality, collaborative working styles, aware of individual differences, non-competitive, tolerant, subjective and formal. By implication it is expected that women should be better and more effective leaders than men, given these characteristics.

Ali (2009, pp. 1-6) suggests an overall positive linear relationship between gender diversity and employee productivity, and postulates an individual value orientation suggesting that men and women require different leadership development approaches. As it is, conflicting reports emerge from different research findings, but McTavish and Miller (2006, p. 15) acknowledge that despite the perceptions about the effectiveness of female leadership qualities, the reality on the ground is that women continue to fail to attain leadership positions. This

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leads us to a question for which no answer has been provided yet; why then are women not found in all senior and strategic leadership positions if they have the necessary qualities for leadership? Contemporary conceptualization envisages a feminine style of leadership which is different from the male counterpart (Fierman, 1990, pp. 115-118), and identifies certain characteristics like heightened communication skills, good listening, well developed interpersonal skills and soft approach to handling people as critical advantages. Eagley (2007, pp. 1-12) concedes that in spite of all the theoretical positives about women leadership, women continue to come second in preference and appear to meet resistance in their leadership roles. Could it be that people by their nature do not like effective leadership?

Contrary to traditional beliefs on stereotyping as informing perceptions about effective leadership (Schein, 2001, pp. 675-688), followers have expectations and do not care about the gender of a leader, if their expectations are met. Stereotyping is the process of making assumptions about individuals solely on the basis of their colour, gender, age or by belonging to a particular group (Hellriegel & Slocum, 1996, p. 493). Women have made inroads into leadership positions in organizations, but continue to be underrepresented in the leadership positions. In the United States 50.5% of employees in managerial and professional jobs are women, there are only 15.4% corporate officers in the Fortune 500 and only 6.7% of the top earners are women (Schneider & Smith, 2004, pp. 347-369). Questions must be asked as to why there will be a universal perception about women leadership in a world diverse because of language, distance, culture and levels of both education and development. By derivation therefore followers using their experience may develop a particular preference for a particular gender or race for that matter. Added to this, if early childhood should be of any critical importance, all mothers are women and all followers will therefore have positive perceptions about women leadership. Is it possible therefore that those mothers have failed as role models, or have failed to impart the right values in the children that they bring up?

Bergh and Theron (2004, p. 81) submit that the career choices between men and women are evident at adolescence, except for those who experience vocational identity diffusion, such are believed to be setting themselves for failure in life. Some research findings suggest psychosexual development which is biologically determined and this may imply the difference in the responses from females and males in the same situations possibly with the presence of different hormones between the two genders; testosterone which accounts for the high energy levels in men and is possibly responsible for the aggression in men (Campbell, 1999, pp. 203-253). Besides, women as mothers may influence the perceptions that children grow up within relation to leadership or followership. The choices that women make for their professions may equally be determinants of what they may become in the later years. This may explain their absence in project leadership, specifically engineering based projects.

2. Background

According to Young (2003, p. 65) leadership is the use of skills to energize and direct groups to willingly perform towards set goals and objectives. By implication, leadership is a skill of influencing the behaviour of people towards willing obedience to perform the agreed on tasks. To be able to influence people, leaders need power (Nieman & Bennet, 2008, p. 100), and power by its definition is the ability to influence. A person has power if they can excel above their counterparts, and the counterparts need to acknowledge and accept that there is someone better than them. Five forms of power are constantly mentioned in the literature, these are; legitimate [authority], reward, referent, expert, and coercive power. The appropriate use of these “powers”, will most likely

yield acceptable results. Pashiards et al. (2003, p. 16) postulate that the type of people, the circumstances and the organizational culture are key determinants of the eventual effectiveness of a leader. To an extent then a postulate can be advanced which presumes that the type of people, in this case men, may have a problem with the leadership of a woman if they do not have the requisite power. It is important to point out that power is what the followers see in you, and not necessarily what you perceive it to be. When men have problems with female leadership, then the buzz word is stereotyping.

Much is published about stereotyping against women, yet what is conspicuous about the debate is the absence of the relevance of the female styles of leadership to the situation and the type of followers. Joyce (2004, pp. 1-11) commenting on project leadership observed that different leadership styles are needed at different stages of the project. If this is true, by implication therefore different types of operations may require different types of leadership, and the feminine leadership styles may not be a one-size-fits-all. Lee-Kelley (2003, pp. 583-591) proposes a significant relationship between a leader's perception of success, contingent experience, and the personality of the individual concerned. The author proposes a model that interprets holistically the dilemma of leadership as it applies to both male and female leaders, and this is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

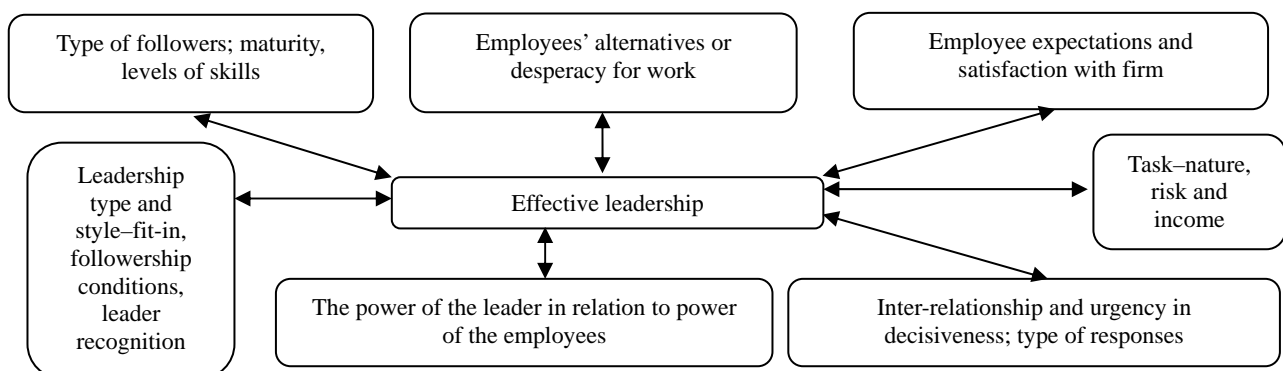


Figure 1 The Relationship between Power, Task and Type of Follower

Source: authors leadership model

The personality of the individual may add on to acceptability, and personality is the unique blend of characteristics that define the individual (Kelly, Jacobs & Farr, 1994, pp. 575-591). These may be interpreted as self confidence, wisdom, initiative, intelligence, visionary and personalities related to behavioural tendencies and looks. Self-confidence, for instance, may derive from expertise in a particular skill, which in turn becomes or results in expert power. The extent to which the expertise becomes a source of power is also dependent on existing expertise and experience amongst the followers or subordinates. If there are more people of the same expertise, there can very easily be a contestation, not because she is female, but because there is competing expertise. Male leaders meet with the same *résistance* and challenges to their ascension to the offices and to their authority, when this happens gender is not used as a reason for exclusion or resentment.

Rao (2009, p. 393) proposes eight qualities of a good leader as; intelligence, communication skills, technical skills, inner drive, energy, human relations, and teaching skills. These become a source of power but need to be complemented by other forms of power as discussed earlier. Stereotyping is stated as the cause of failure of women in leadership, but no mention is made of women failing in leadership of other women. What will have happened when a man fails whilst leading other men and women, can it be because of stereotyping? The researcher submits to the theory that some failures are due to the leader being unable to fit into the situation and

respond to the needs of the followers and the task at hand. Women may have a serious problem if they spend a lot of time worrying about their *womanness* and not concentrating on leadership, this may lead to loss of focus and self-confidence. This can very easily be one area of women weakness, worrying about being a woman and not about being a leader.

Discrimination; racial, gender, language or tribal (Hellriegel, Jackson & Slocum, 1999, p. 631) should not be confused with stereotyping, which forms an insignificant element of follower perceptions about the ability of someone to meet their expectations. Another question to ask; are there any women managers who stand out as having been very successful leaders on the basis of which the models of leadership may be drawn? Ely (1995, pp. 589-634) observed that as the number of employees of a particular subculture increase, its members experience decreased negative stereotyping. In a sense, everyone given to lead experiences a degree of the stereotype, either because of race, language, physical body structure, your history as known by followers, or if you simply do not subscribe to acceptable values or religion. Most health institutions have more women than men, but most leaders and managers are always male, stereotyping cannot be blamed exclusively for this. Even when women are in the majority, they still do not feature in senior leadership, why? On the other hand, personal power relates to the personality of the individual concerned, their conduct, self-confidence, expertise, physical stature, interpersonal relationships, and the leadership style and its relevance to the people concerned (Robins, 2005, p. 394). Table 1 below provides a summary- comparison of differences between men and women in leadership.

Table 1 Contrasting the Characteristics of Men and Women in Leadership

Men	Women
Autocratic	Democratic
Poor inter personal relations	Good interpersonal relations
Production focused	Relation/people focused
Care little about personal problems	Worried by people's personal problems
Decisive	Takes time to decide
Risk takers	Risk averse
Lead from the front	Lead by consensus
Assertive	Doubtful/low self-confidence

Together with this should be understood, the role, type and maturity of the followership in relation to the task and objectives to be met. Reducing the failure of women to be in leadership positions simply because they are women may be too simplistic, but it poses questions that need research further. Management positions are appointments made by human beings and therefore have an element of subjectivity. But what is difficult to understand is why women who are in the majority will not choose other women leaders. In the South African context, the women (white) who could not qualify to be managers during apartheid have been quickly pushed up by white male managers in the name of Affirmative Action and Employment Equity ahead of black males. Can it be that overnight the same women who could not manage have developed the skill with political changes, or was it merely selfishness on the part of the male. Admittedly, there is an element of *genderism*, but this does not explain why women do not fight to get into leadership.

Culture is dynamic, and continuous education and training together with inter-cultural interaction in the presence of ever-changing technology constantly alter traditional values. Contingency theories posit that the effectiveness of a leader is a dependent variable based on the characteristics of the followers (Bodla & Hussain 2010, pp. 73-81). Leaders therefore lead with the permission of the followers and their success is dependent on permission by the followers. Followers have their own expectations, based on the expectancy theories, this will

inform their behaviour and acceptance of a leader, not the gender specifically. As such, the effectiveness of a leader is a function of the characteristics of the followers, the contemporary employee is a dynamic follower (Nelson & Quick, 2006, p. 407) with clearly defined aspirations and expectations. These followers live in an environment full of information with rights and preferences (consumerism and unionism). Figure 2 below illustrates these preferences.

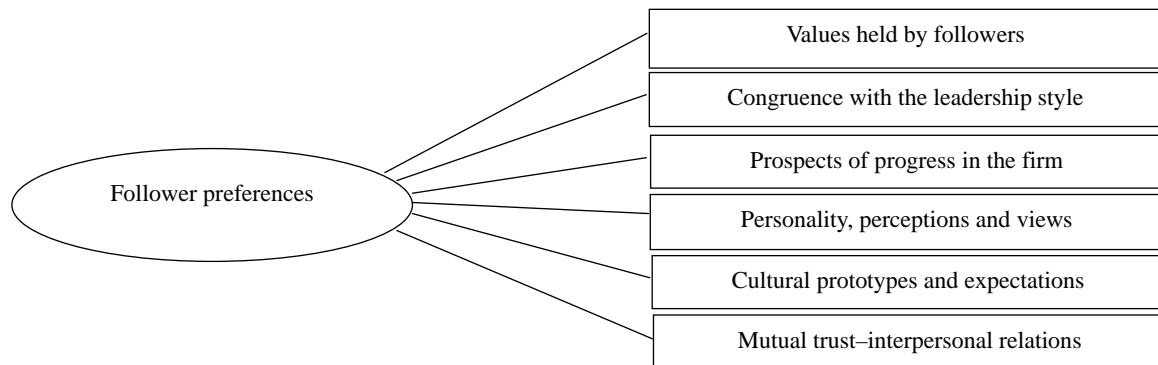


Figure 2 Follower Preferences That Shape Accepted Leadership Style

Kelly et al. (1994, pp. 575-591) identified features that distinguish good from bad followers, and classified them as effective and ineffective followers. Any women aspiring to be effective leaders need to focus on the expectations of the followers and take prompt decisive actions. A good understanding of the followers specifically relating to what causes followership, what causes resentment and expectations must be well understood, regardless of gender or race. It is the effectiveness of the followers that produces results, and not the effectiveness of the leaders. Effectiveness of the leaders can only be understood in the context of the leaders' ability to have the followers' interests converge with the leaders' style, given that the organisational objectives are a constant in this case.

Values and views held by followers; if the followers at a construction site, for example, hold the view that the work is hard and should be for strong people, consensus leadership may have no support. If it be true therefore that women prefer leading by consensus, they will be resented by the followers. The reason for rejection is not because of who they are, but what they are believed to be, or do and how they do it.

Congruence with the leadership style; if the leadership style does not produce expected results, or is not in tandem with the followers' expectations, the leader will have fallout with the subordinates. The technocrat Thabo Mbeki was replaced by no-big-name Jacob Zuma as president of the ANC, not because he was a woman, but he did not seek and maintain congruence with the followers.

Personality and perceptions; too often perceptions are not the truth, but it is the perceptions that people act according. A product well advertised and seen regularly by the customers, creates the impression of a reliable product. As long as there is a perception that mitigates against women and their personalities, it will always impact on their acceptability as managers.

Cultural prototypes; are the reality that people live with. There are certain acceptable norms, deriving largely from experience [or perpetuated perceptions], that may inform people about what to expect from a particular type of person. The cultural values we have inform the belief that people have, unfortunately it is a global phenomenon amongst both men and women that women cannot lead well, why?

Mutual trust and interpersonal relations; it is clear that the average person will like people that are warm

towards them, or those who are kind. Depending on the task involved, interpersonal relations may not be good enough alone as a soft skill to warrant acceptance as a leader. Such a soft skill may work out as a nice-to-have in a person, but may not have what it takes given the task at hand.

2.1 Global Discrimination against Women

In a study of five countries, Schein (2001, p. 683) observed that; “Despite the many historical, political, and cultural differences that exist among these five countries (British, Chinese, Japanese, German and USA), the view of women as less likely than men to possess requisite management characteristics is a commonly held belief among male management students around the world.” This is a very profound statement, and unfortunately it is quickly taken out of the realm of “academic interest”, to be classified as “stereotyping” and excites a lot of political debate and heightened emotions.

Dipboye (1975, pp. 22-26) asserted then that “Despite contradictory evidence, stereotypes concerning female inadequacy as managers persist and act to distort perceptions of male and female performance and potential. One obvious consequence of these ideas is that a man is more likely to be selected for a managerial position than is an equally qualified woman.” If it was true then because they were comparatively few women who had high qualifications, what reason would be given today for the selection of men into management to the exclusion of women. Hellen Zille the leader of the DA (South Africa) could not put a single woman into her cabinet, what reason can be given then? It cannot be stereotyping. Is there no likelihood that when people are excluded, the reasons given are based on the gender of the person concerned, more than the exact reason? Why is it difficult for women to work under other women, or to have other women work under them? Why do mothers-in-law always fight with their daughters-in-law?

Gender diversity is increasingly a norm in the work places globally, yet women in senior positions continue to be few. Research findings show little evidence of gender based productivity (Ali, Kulik, & Metz, 2009, pp. 1-6), yet women continue to be present in low numbers. It has been observed that when the number of women increase in an organisation, there is noticeable differences in collaboration, solidarity, conflict resolution, reciprocity, self sustaining action, work group effectiveness and levels of interpersonal sensitivity increase accordingly (Westermann, Ashby & Pretty, 2005, pp. 1783-1799). The absence of women in project management, specifically engineering enterprises creates a challenge for a project manager when women join the workforce. The construction environment is characterised as “macho” and predominantly male, female managers are considered incompetent, lacking in leadership, too soft for the tasks. Research findings (Neuhauser, 2007, pp. 21-32) show that women are prone to resort to transformational leadership, are less autocratic, believe in consensus, show empathy, and have good interpersonal relations with subordinates. As such a female project manager in a “macho” construction site may not be taken seriously and classified merely as an affirmative action appointee.

Herbert (2006, p. 29) said about Hilary Clinton “When the crunch comes, the toughest issue for Clinton may be the one that so far has been talked about least. If she runs, she will be handicapped by her gender.” Dobryznyski (2006, p. 16) reported that male directors in the United States are simply afraid to take unnecessary risks by selecting a woman into a senior position. “In contemporary culture of the United States, women on one hand are lauded as having the right combination of skills for leadership, yielding superior leadership styles and outstanding effectiveness. On the other hand, there appears to be widespread recognition that women often come in second to men in competitions to attain leadership positions. Women are still portrayed as suffering disadvantage in access to leadership positions as well as prejudice and resistance when they occupy these roles.” Women project managers have to contend with this, sad to say that even the other women themselves believe

more in the management of men and not of fellow women.

2.2 Women Managers and Stress

Conflicting views in academia over women and men have been; (1) that women are the same as men and will therefore react the same as men, or (2) that women are the opposite of men and thus will react differently to the same circumstances (Fielden & Cooper, 2001, pp. 3-16). Because women are seriously underrepresented in senior management positions, it may be difficult to have a reliable study on how women respond to managerial stress. Nelson and Burke (2000, pp. 107-121) postulated that more women than men suffer from managerial stress, and this was attributed to their feeling about men only environment and the pressure and excessive work they get involved in. In another study Nelson and Quick (1985, pp. 206-218) on a research on women senior managers recorded that women attributed their success in a male dominated environment to; trying to work harder than men, and behaving (managing) and doing what men do when they manage. A clear indication that particular leader behaviours bring certain production results, and that women who want to be successful need to manage people the way the people want to be managed. This may account for some of the reasons why many women do not want to take up management positions, for fear of both pressure and failure.

3. Causes of the Imbalance

In this research I offer a middle ground between computational analysis of individuals and the resultant structures from the social interactions of the heterogeneous organisation (Weick, 2005, pp. 409-421). Within the organisation are; individual preferences against organisational goals, follower attitudes to the leader. The ability of the leader and followers to adapt to each other constitutes effective leadership, it has nothing to do with gender, it is about "customer satisfaction". Aquinas (2008, p. 17) asserts that change has become the norm in the societies and the organisations alike. The most successful leaders are those who change with the environment and organisational culture, women included. The individual people have their individual cultures in heterogeneous organisations, and the sum total of these create a new cultural equilibrium resultant from the external pressures, internal integration, and the different experiences. Women leaders like any other leaders must learn to adjust to these, and be what the followership expects of leaders. A powerful followership will not change to accommodate particular styles of leadership, but will judge harshly those that do not meet their expectations. Failure to adjust will result in rejection of leadership which will always be interpreted as stereotyping, when it is actually failure of female leadership to adjust to changing conditions and expectations of the impatient followers.

The author believes that the problem in the imbalance between men and women in leadership positions resides with the women first. Whatever else should be seen as subsequent to the way women are and how they perceive themselves. Indira Ghandi was prime minister of India, and how many women ministers did she have during her 18 year rule? Alternatively the question may be directed to whether there was any change in the number of women in senior positions. The British Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher was at the helm of British politics, and during her 12 year tenure as prime minister, she could have left an indelible impression on gender equality in senior positions, there is none evident. Many such leaders have come and gone, Gold Meir of Israel, Corazon Aquino of the Philippines, Bandaranaike of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Violeta Chamorro of Nicaragua, and the list will go on. One may point out that these were strong women who were chosen for their power and ability to influence, and hence they became leaders chosen and supported by men. The women themselves do not find that quality amongst themselves, honestly, people who know that they are able but are discriminated against may want to use

their majority power to assert their position, specifically in politics. Alternatively, women themselves realize their own shortcomings in leadership hence their lack of support for other women in leadership, or their unwillingness to take up leadership challenges.

The terrain of leadership will not change, nor the contestations for the positions cease because there is a woman contesting. Women will therefore have to fight within the context of the aspirations of men for leadership, and stand the heat in the kitchen. The failure or success of a leader should be understood more in the context of the followers as they are the single most critical element of the success or failure of a leader. There is no effective leadership style that will take place without a proper understanding of the expectations and characteristics of the followers (Li, 2006, pp. 1689-1706). Leadership success and the style thereof should be a result of the interaction between the leader and the followers, *you are who you are because of other people*. By implication, women may not succeed in all circumstances if they use the same styles of leadership to different types of subordinates.

4. Conclusion

The author holds the controversial view that it is not altogether correct that women are excluded from leadership because they are women. There are other factors, most probably residing in “womanhood” that lead to this universal absence of women in senior leadership positions. Consider women’s determination to “dress the way we want”, though it was resisted in the South African black cultures, today women largely dress as they please. The question arising therefore is that they were determined to and they got it, why don’t they show the same determination in fighting to qualify as leaders if there is nothing untoward about their leadership? For a while now it was believed that equal education and opportunities would provide women with better chances of taking up management positions (Billing & Alvesson, 1989, pp. 63-80), it is acknowledged that there haven’t been much changes in the society regardless of the large number of females doing tertiary education. There is an apparent incongruence between the proportion of females who have gone through higher education and those that are in senior positions. Other arguments advanced are that women tend to take up studies in areas that do not lead them to leadership, say in the humanities. If that can be considered a true statement, it still leaves questions unanswered; why would women crowd themselves in such disciplines? Besides, what is the ratio of women to men in leadership in those particular areas of specialization? Devanna (1987) observed that “it would seem that when women invest in the same education and skills as men, they earn equal access to ‘male’ occupations, but not equal treatment in the internal corporate labour markets”. This eliminates lack of equal education as a compelling factor for the exclusion of women, possibly suggesting therefore that women are purposely excluded from the system. This leads to another unanswered question: why don’t women rise in places where other women are in senior leadership? Proponents of the equal opportunities approach propose that the cultural and social processes lead to bias. The more differences between the genders in, values, personalities and characteristics, the more difficult it becomes to apply the equal opportunities philosophy.

All these above suggest the presence of fundamental inequalities in the society at large, and the paper seeks to get outside of the traditional approach to this subject. The same old questions asked before which are now anathema are introduced into the debate and discussed to some controversial detail.

What is the likelihood that women simply refuse, or possibly find it difficult to move themselves mentally from the role of follower in the home, to leader at work? The gender roles at home may in a sense mean less mental pressure on the women as compared to the testosterone driven men. The decision to take up the position or

compete for it may depend largely on fear of failure or rejection by the followership. This leads to another psychology question: can women take rejection in the same way that men do?

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